

## **A GUIDE TO CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCENIC RIVER DESIGNATION PROCESS**

In 1970 legislation authorizing the establishment of a Virginia Scenic Rivers System was enacted by the General Assembly. The legislation set up a framework whereby the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) was charged with conducting studies and presenting reports and recommendations to the legislature concerning potential additions to the System. The General Assembly must then consider the report and take legislative action for the river to actually become a designated scenic river. Following a series of unsuccessful designation attempts, it became apparent that future attempts would have to go far beyond the mere preparation of a report in order to be successful. Political reality dictated a need for development of a strong local citizen base for support of the candidate river designation in the jurisdictions where the candidate river was located.

In response to the initial challenges, Department staff began working with local advisory groups to add candidate rivers to the Scenic River System. Since the program's inception, designation of seventeen (17) Scenic Rivers and two (2) Historic Rivers now comprise the 437-mile System. This paper is not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather to give potential interest groups or individuals some idea of the amount and type of work involved in obtaining Scenic River designation.

The initial step for individuals or groups interested in the possible designation of a river is to contact the DCR Division of Planning and Recreation Resources. After preliminary conversations, a meeting among all interested parties to discuss the designation process is a next logical step. The purpose of the initial meeting is actually fourfold:

1. To discuss the Virginia Scenic Rivers Program and the designation process.
2. To organize a local advisory committee.
3. To formalize a working relationship between the advisory committee and the DCR program staff.
4. To outline a preliminary work plan.

The local advisory committee may be composed of a combination of local officials, civic leaders, riparian landowners, conservation interests, and other citizens. If properly structured, this committee should represent a variety of interests, thereby broadening its base of support and providing a vital liaison with as many local groups as possible. Before an evaluation of the qualities of a potential designated river, DCR needs, in hand, a letter from the Board of Supervisors or County Administrator requesting that a study be conducted.

Once the request is sent and the local advisory committee formed, the advisory committee will have two primary functions:

1. Preparation for the evaluation and field study -- Initial information needs to be gathered for the study report and provided to DCR in advance of their field visit(s). Preparations need to be made for the field visit through organization of boats, shuttles, and guides. Additionally, advisory committee representatives need to be ready to participate in the actual field study.
2. Development of community-wide support -- This is necessary to ensure the success of the designation attempt.

The first of these responsibilities is the easiest and least time consuming. It basically involves the gathering of information on natural, historical, and recreational features of the river that make it worthy of inclusion in the System. This information is provided to DCR staff as they prepare for their evaluation field trips and the resulting writing of the final report. Advisory committee facilitation of and participation in the field visit also deserves emphasis.

Developing a necessary base of support for a designation is considerably more involved. Support from four (4) sectors of the community is essential to success. These four sectors or groups are:

1. Riparian landowners
2. Civic groups
3. Local Boards of Supervisors and other affected local government entities
4. Local members of the General Assembly

The support of riparian landowners is critical to the success of a designation attempt. Consequently, identifying those landowners should be one of the advisory committee's top priorities. Copies of tax maps and the names and mailing addresses of property owners are usually easily obtainable at the office of the County Commissioner of Revenue. Once riparian landowners are identified, meeting with each one is the best way to ensure that the Scenic River concept and its relationship to owners is understood. If personal contact with all landowners is not possible, each should receive a letter, drafted by the committee, discussing the program and inviting questions. Included in the letter could be an invitation to a community meeting where questions can be answered within the format of a public forum. At the very least, those riparian landowners thought to have the greatest degree of local influence should be individually contacted and asked to lend assistance and support to the advisory committee.

Although it may prove to be a formidable task, keeping landowners well informed throughout the study and designation process is essential. It may be useful to set up periodic informational meetings to ensure that landowners and other local citizens have ample opportunity to express their concerns and/or support.

Other important sources for contacts that can be of significant assistance in developing a broad base of support are local civic groups and organizations. These groups can serve as an effective means of disseminating information about the scenic river proposal. The opportunity to make presentations should not be overlooked. Groups such as Ruritan, garden clubs, historical societies, sportsmen's groups, Chambers of Commerce, and conservation groups can become

enthusiastic supporters of the designation process. Presentations not only raise the level of public awareness but they also help prevent misinformation. And, additional proactive supporters may be gained who can be counted on for meetings or hearings with local governing bodies.

In addition to informing and educating the riparian landowners and local civic groups, local governing bodies must be kept fully informed and up-to-date on critical issues involved in the designation attempt. It is beneficial to schedule an informal meeting to let them know a designation is being considered, to set up a means of communication, and then to continue keeping them informed on study progress. Also, tell them of potential points of contention as soon as possible. Thus, when their support is formally requested, they will be aware of the issues. The unqualified support of local government is one of the most critical factors associated with the passage of scenic river designation.

When and if opposition to scenic designation surfaces, whether from individuals or organizations, every effort should be made to personally address all complaints. This is necessary for two reasons. First, misconceptions and misinformation need to be straightened out before they become widespread. Second, complaints give proponents information on the primary concerns of opponents and, therefore, ideas on how to prepare an effective response.

Once the study has been completed and the report and designation recommendations finalized, resolutions and letters of support should be solicited from as many governmental and civic groups and individuals as possible. These letters and resolutions will become part of the official record when and if a public hearing on the designation recommendation is held.

There is one other group of individuals whom you will want to alert to your efforts and whose support is essential to your cause. They are the local members of the General Assembly. Their participation will be necessary in order to introduce the designation legislation and support it as it goes through the legislative process. You should find that when there is strong local support for scenic rivers, local legislators are usually pleased to introduce the necessary bills when requested to do so by the local governing body. Sample "boilerplate" legislation can be obtained from DCR staff.

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